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ABSTRACT

An experiential learning program for secondary moderate and severe mentally handicapped students allows them to learn practical skills and habits needed for adulthood. The program incorporates meaningful jobs within the school, on school grounds, and within the community. Components include a classroom store, practical reading lessons involving shopping lists and form completions, walking field trips, overnight trips, and activities using the telephone. The development of good work habits is stressed. Students are placed in community job training sites and their performance is monitored. Program involvement is specified in the Individualized Education Program (IEP). (CL)

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THE LAMBERTON PROJECT: A SECONDARY PROGRAM USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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Experiential learning means using real-life experiences to learn. For the mentally handicapped this has special significance. The lower a person's intelligence, the less abstracting ability he/she has. The mentally handicapped, therefore, rely on the more "concrete" modes of thinking and learning. These are the visual and tactile modes. This makes experiential learning that much more effective and common sense. When students can learn by actually doing things in life that they will eventually have to cope with as adults, learning suddenly has meaning and breeds a sense of belonging.

THE PROGRAM This program capitalizes on these unique learning needs. Secondary moderate and severe mentally handicapped students learn practical skills and habits needed for adulthood through this experiential learning program.

Teaching through experiential learning starts within the school. Instead of designing artificial activities on desks, tables, worksheets, etc., meaningful "jobs" are designed which involve the needed skills. Students are then assigned these jobs and given assistance as needed. This experiential learning model moves in concentric circles out from the school classroom, to the school building, to school grounds, and to the community. In addition, there are overnight trips to other parts of the state and country. Least Restrictive Environment becomes mainstream society, and not hard-to-relate-to "normal" classrooms.

ACTIVITIES Students vary widely as to abilities. While some are learning to count objects to ten through the job of taking inventory in The Lamberton Store, others use calculators to figure coffee bills from the tally sheet in the teachers' room.

The Lamberton Store, which encompasses half the classroom and serves the entire school, provides a multitude of experiential learning jobs. Students wait on customers, handle money, cook and prepare many food items, and take inventory. They also receive a weekly paycheck (cashable only in The Lamberton Store) and learn appropriate decision-making and social behavior as customers in the store as well. As can be seen, this experiential learning replicates real-life experiences.

Students learn to read an extensive series of community sign words and excursions into the community apply these basic reading skills to the real-world environment. In the past, traditional teaching methods saw students who reached "criterion" in their sterile classroom environments, but couldn't begin to apply those skills in a public setting! Daily learning activities need to involve reality as much as possible. Remember, generalizing learning from one setting to another is an abstraction. Mentally handicapped persons have difficulty with abstractions.

Higher-functioning "readers" take part in simple Dolch word reading and writing lessons. These practical lessons involve shopping lists, message-writing for the store, and the writing of "experience-story" paragraphs for the program newsletter.

Forms, which incorporate name-writing, date, and time, head up each inventory sheet for The Lamberton Store. Each student has his own clipboard and inventory sheet. Naturally, students need different amounts of assistance on these practical tasks. They develop decision-making skills by assessing items that need to be purchased at the grocery store. Grocery shopping lists are then made.

Several trips into town for varius errands are made each week. Grocery shopping is a regular stop. Small groups are scheduled different days to do errands in the school car. One afternoon per week is allotted for a walking field-trip, paying particular attention to pedestrian skills and community orientation (identifying common sites, etc.). When in the car, one student is always the "navigator", giving directions to the next stop ("turn right", "turn left", "straight"). This driver follows their directions explicitly, and sometimes does a lot of turning around!

Telephone skills are developed and practiced by always using real telephones. Different students make various kinds of calls. Lower-functioning students call home, practicing number skills, dialling, speech, and language skills. Others call about errands or students who are absent. When on car-errand excursions into town, students practice using public pay-telephones.

VOCATIONAL: Vocational training has strong emphasis in this program. Our students have a great need for extensive training in preparation for joining the work force in our society. Their potential is often unrecognized.

Students generally spend half of each school day assigned to functional academics tasks, and half assigned to vocational training jobs. These jobs range from in-school assignments to community work-experience placements (remember, concentric circles). Job assignments and work placements are based on individual ability levels and needs.

Development of good work habits is at least as important as work skills. However, both are started in the school and progressively moved to community work sites. Some students, especially new students, need more supervision and verbal prompting. Others are

extremely independent and show great pride. It should be noted that intelligence has nothing to do with developing responsibility. Some of our lower-functioning students have developed tremendous responsibility and pride in routine tasks.

Numerous jobs and job routines have been developed in and around the school building. They range from specific maintenance and custodial tasks, to outside groundskeeping, brushcutting, and building projects (i.e. picnic tables).

Students "punch in" with their time-card at the time clock in the classroom. It is understood that when students are punched in, they should be working. And at the end of their work period they punch out. Students learn that they will be paid as long as they are punched in and working. Students who refuse to work or are fired, are then punched out and informed they are not being paid.

It's tremendous to see new students thrive with their newly developed pride and satisfaction in productive work.

Paychecks are calculated based on work output and amount of time registered on time-cards. At the beginning of each week, students receive paychecks for the previous week's work. It's a very reinforcing time for them. Profits from the Lamberton Store are the source of money for paychecks.

All students work in the community at job training sites for a good portion of the year. Most students work three half-days per week (Tuesday-Thursday). Special school subjects (art, music, gym, speech) have been scheduled for Mondays and Fridays for this important purpose.

Few students need constant supervision. Most need sporadic checking or none at all. All are improving. If there is serious question as to potential for improvement (for example, an easily distractable student in a confusing social setting), a change in placement is made.

Sometimes students, due to individual needs or available supervision, work in an "enclave" at a particular site. This approach allows one supervisor to work with a group of students at one site in the community. Though more sheltered than individual placements, it allows closer supervision by school staff, yet still provides a more normalized work setting than the school.

Surprisingly, community job training sites are not difficult to find. When approached in a non-threatening manner, "employers" are usually willing to at least give it a try. Important selling points are: employers don't pay students; students are covered by the school's insurance (not the employer's); students must be more help than hinder; and we supply supervision to at least get them started (if not on-going supervision).

Job sites are sought and students carefully assigned based on individual work habits, work skills, supervision needs, potential for improvement, and social skills. Very rarely are community work placements unsuccessful when carefully made. There have been, however, times when we've had potential sites available but have been unable to use them because they did not suit student needs - either they were too sheltered or too independent for the number of students we had to go around.

Generally, non-profit sites tend to be more easily obtained and more receptive to idiosyncrasies, but are often too pampering and not demanding enough. Some employers need regular "pep talks" to firm up their expectations and approach. Our students are easily influenced by the expectations we put on them. A friendly, but firm, no-nonsense, work-ethic approach is best. It offers a sense of dignity and comradery with the employer.

At one work site, a student was placed at a beverage distributor warehouse. The owner was very receptive to him coming, and assured us that one of his men ("Slim") could handle the supervision with "no problem". He insisted we leave him that first day. When we picked up Bob an hour and a half later, he had drank two sodas while working and had been given two more to take with him. After another "pep talk" with Slim, Bob drank only two sodas on his second day of work. He's now down to one. Needless to say, Bob's always loved his job!

Employers' enthusiasm and attitude changes are some of the most exciting benefits of working with such a program. Most of our students obviously "look" mentally handicapped, and although employers "out of the kindness of their hearts" may agree to a placement, the skepticism is evident. However, as employers take over more of the supervision, they are truly impressed with the students' capacity for work and responsibility. What a good feeling on everyone's part!

PLANNING: Individual Education Plans (IEP's) reflect all the aforementioned areas, including specific goals and activities. During the year, specific parent permission for regular community excursions is not needed as they are spelled out in the IEP, agreed upon, and signed at the IEP conference. Parents generally are receptive and responsive to such a straightforward, practical approach to their child's learning needs.

Lesson planning provides a unique challenge to such an individualized, going-in-all-directions approach to teaching. Our secondary program's staff includes a teacher, teacher-assistant, aide, and two volunteers. We have twelve students. Lesson plans

become a chart on the wall including student names, specific IEP goals (for three 12-week periods), columns for days of the week, names of activities, activity codes (corresponding with nearby index cards describing materials and procedure), and staff assignments. IEP goals are all behaviorally stated. With periodic review, the objectives (IEP goals) are colored in (yellow marker) as competency is demonstrated (usually four out of five times).

With several staff members directly involved with students at so many different settings, daily communication is a must. Decisions must be made with everyone's input, and sometimes internal "training" needs to be done. Training may involve developing staff members' positive reinforcement skills, or insight into student needs. It is critical for a supervisor to understand both the overall objectives of the program and the specific objectives for the student he/she is instructing or supervising in that setting. Weekly general staff meetings are also important.

Summary: Perhaps the best reason for this program is the personal reaction by students. They relate to this kind of learning, wallow in the sense of belonging, and as a result their self-concept and dignity are greatly enhanced.

There are much easier ways to operate a program. But none are as exciting and as appropriate as this experiential learning approach. The mentally handicapped learn best through visual, tactile, "hands-on" activities. With a little thought and insight, teachers can bring learning needs and real-life experiences together, making student learning a satisfying, relevant, learning experience. And the student will retain this learning and easily carry it over into adulthood.

Normally intelligent children have a natural capacity for learning, building upon it with more learning, and applying it. Mentally handicapped people, who seem to lack that natural capacity, actually simply lack the abstracting ability to generalize from symbolic classroom activities to the real world. Therefore, the experiential learning approach greatly reduces the need for difficult generalizations. Learning is practical, "hands-on", and more easily applied to other real situations. This method makes their "handicapping condition" less handicapping.

ADDENDUM: Three or four overnight trips per year add more extensive traveling, independence, and depth to students' learning experiences. Often these trips involve camping in tents or other school buildings in various areas. Hot-air balloon festivals, rock concerts, cross-country skiing, the ocean, or just seeing other places are all good reasons for travel. Some of the areas travelled to include the Adirondack Mountains (N.Y.), The St. Lawrence Seaway, Lake Champlain, Vermont, New Hampshire, Cape Cod, Niagara Falls, and Florida. Students have gained tremendously from these trips, in both measurable and immeasurable ways.